

Essential Elements of a Post-COVID Board Retreat: Not Business as Usual

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What was the most effective, memorable, and productive board retreat that you have ever attended? What were the key ingredients that made it this way? (Haven't had one like this yet?)

Whether your first post-COVID board retreat lasts a few hours in the boardroom or several days at an off-site location, the following are five essential elements and steps that can change a retreat from "business as usual" to something intellectually engaging, producing highly effective results. These factors will generate leveraged outcomes and elevated commitments to action by participants individually and collectively.

The five factors include:

- Focused and intentional pre-retreat preparation
- Clarity of purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes
- A balanced mix of presentations and interactive group work
- Facilitation that accentuates intellectual engagement by every participant
- Shared statements of key takeaways and personal commitments to action

Pre-Retreat Preparation

A great retreat starts at least three to six months (or more) in advance. First, begin with specific written and well-honed statements of the purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes. What should participants learn, understand, contribute, decide, and/or act upon?

Next Retreat Focus: Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Experience

How did we deal with ambiguity, disruption, scarcity, subsidy? What went well during the process? What will we do differently going forward in each of the following seven areas?

- Financial
- Operations
- Service lines
- Clinical processes and outcomes
- Patient experience
- Teamwork, adaptability
- Leadership effectiveness and processes (at every level)

Once the purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes are identified, design an agenda of topics, presentations, activities, and work groups that will actively and directly engage participants to meet these results. Enhance the flow and feel of the meeting with activities that will engage participants intellectually, physically, and socially. Consider the following format:

- **Icebreaker—level the discussion platform:** Begin the retreat with an introductory all-hands participation exercise by asking participants to write down the answer to two questions, such as the following:
 1. What is one lesson you learned personally or professionally from the COVID experience?
 2. What is the most important outcome for you from this retreat?

Participants should be given about 90 seconds to write their answers. (Giving them time to write is essential to making this exercise most effective.) Then, one-by-one, each participant is asked to share their answers. It is helpful to record a few words to summarize each person's answer. The outcomes list can be referenced at the end of the retreat to see how many of the desired outcomes were met. This exercise makes it easy and comfortable for participants to contribute for the rest of the retreat.

- **Keynotes:** Identify crisp, focused keynote presentation topics and presenters (using internal and external sources) to provide updates on the state-of-the-organization post-COVID (succinctly recap accomplishments, setbacks, unforeseen challenges/opportunities, innovations, exceptional performance, etc.), competitor activities, partnerships and alliances, and other relevant topics.
- **Industry update:** Include an industry update focused on post-COVID trends and their strategic and business implications.
- **Service lines:** Overview key service lines and COVID's impact on each

Key Board Takeaways

- Select a few highly relevant articles or other background reference materials to share with retreat participants beforehand to instill a strategic mindset and increase the quality of discussion at the meeting.
- Conduct a brief pre-retreat survey to solicit input from participants regarding strategic issues, opportunities, challenges, and other topics to be covered at the meeting.
- After each presentation, ask participants to write down their key takeaways.
- Have board members share their takeaways in small "lightning-round" discussion groups to increase engagement and generative thinking. This also reinforces learning and provides feedback regarding if the information shared achieved its intended purpose.
- Throughout the retreat, ask at appropriate times, "What questions do you have?" vs. "Do you have any questions?"

(profitability, market share, competitive position, brand recognition and loyalty, growth plans and opportunities, prospects, etc.).

- **Strategic planning:** The central focus of many retreats is to review and update the organization's strategic plan. Post-COVID offers a tremendous opportunity for boards and

Sample Retreat Objectives

- Validate and confirm the mission, vision, and values of the health system, considering the perspective of the COVID-19 experience.
- Address top-priority strategic issues for the health system (access, key service lines, outpatient strategy, physician enterprise, financial expectations, workforce, innovation, technology, new models of care delivery, patient experience, and continuum of care).
- Building upon COVID-19 learnings, update the three-to-five-year goals, metrics, and initial strategies for the strategic plan.
- Insert check-in points at appropriate durations in the plan to consider progress and direction and assess whether different actions or direction need to be taken (to enable nimbleness/flexibility).

senior management teams to build on their respective experiences and learnings to enrich, focus, and “amp-up” their traditional plans. Discussions can be invigorated about alliances and partnerships and new technology applications to improve and streamline care processes and access to services.

Brand identity, social media use and effectiveness, and consumer awareness can be seen from a new perspective to target niche consumer groups more effectively with aligned interests and needs. Other discussions should focus on the organization’s ability to accelerate the road to risk, embracing value-based reimbursements in partnership with physicians, and streamlining transitions in care to eliminate waste and match patient care needs with the appropriate resources in the right settings at the right time across the continuum of care.

Data analytics are the bedrock of ensuring these outcomes are achieved. Such data can and must be translated into essential, useful information in real-time for clinicians at the bedside or other outpatient point-of-service settings. This capability will provide significant quality, financial, and competitive advantages over those who are behind the curve with these processes.

- **Strategic discussions in small groups:** Small groups can be assigned specific subjects to discuss such as:
 - » Key service lines (What is their current performance? How can the service line be strengthened to be more effective, competitive, and serve more people?)
 - » Specific goals or pillars to examine and refresh and associated metrics and strategies that may need to be updated, with an eye to applying lessons learned from COVID-19 and an “altered state” of perspective and expectations by patients, providers, and payers.
 - » Other subject matter areas that need fresh examination including brand identity; physician alignment, engagement, and satisfaction; philanthropy; employer relationships; social determinants of health; diversity; and others.



- **Other involvement and participation exercises:** Many other small work group exercises can be considered and selected to engage in based on their fit toward achieving the retreat objectives and outcomes. Some favorites include:
 - » Vision-by-Design (creates multiple visuals of a desired future state in small work groups of three or four people)
 - » Competitor Board (identifies actions competitors could take in your market)
 - » Culture and Values Trade-offs (where are you now and where would you like to be relative to specific values and characteristics)
 - » “Memorize” the Strategic Plan (in 12 minutes or less—a strategy prioritizing activity)
 - » Build the Tallest Tower (team building with gumdrops and spaghetti)

12-Minute Pre-Retreat Survey

It is helpful to conduct a pre-retreat survey of key issues that will be discussed at the meeting. This can be done electronically or by email. It is a very useful tool to survey participants to learn their perspectives and get input beforehand on issues that will be discussed at the retreat.¹

Takeaways and Commitment to Action

Someone once wisely counseled to never leave a meeting without a commitment to action. This activity at the conclusion of the retreat can easily become the most impactful element of the retreat. One way to do this is to ask

participants to write down the answers to two questions:

1. What is your most significant take-away from the retreat?
2. What one thing are you willing to commit to do differently to accelerate our vision from this point forward?

As with the icebreaker exercise to begin the retreat, participants should be given about 90 seconds of silence to reflect and write their answers. Then, one-by-one, each participant is asked to share their takeaways and commitment to action.

Closing the retreat this way solidifies the purpose and learnings of the day. It also reaffirms that the sometimes philosophical discussions that have taken place can and must be internalized and translated to purposeful action, and that each participant will be contributing not only as a single individual, but in harmony with a collective team effort unified in purpose and action toward a common vision, mission, and values.

Use these proven principles to make your post-COVID-19 retreat the most impactful, highly effective, and actionable ever!

The Governance Institute thanks Guy M. Masters, M.P.A., President of Masters Healthcare Consulting and Governance Institute Advisor, for contributing this article. He has facilitated hundreds of highly effective board retreats during his career. For more information on the tools, exercises, or processes mentioned in the article, email him at guymasters11@gmail.com or call (818) 416-2166.

¹ Contact the author for a sample survey.